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ABSTRACT

A syntactic and semantic analysis of the morpheme "kom" in the Hmong language and its place in sentence embedding is presented. Sample sentences of other researchers were compared with information found in folk tales and the resultant hypotheses were tested on native informants. The morpheme has been previously described as meaning the conjunction "in order that," the verb "cause," and the verbs "make" and "want" followed by a subordinate clause. Here it is shown to also function as a higher verb meaning "tell," or "order someone to do something," as a complementizer introducing an embedded sentence, and as an idiomatic phrase when followed by the "can/able to" particle "tau." Each of these functions is analyzed using the Standard Theory as framework. (MSE)

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The Morpheme Kom: A First Analysis and Look at Embedding in Hmong

Annie Jaisser

The intent of this paper is to give a syntactic and semantic analysis of the morpheme kom in Hmong in an attempt to gain insights into sentence embedding. In his section on subordinate clauses, Mottin (1978) has described kom as the conjunction 'so that, in order that' heading a resultative clause. Heimbach (1979) has described kom as the verbs 'cause, bring into effect'. Bertrais (1979) listed kom as the verbs 'make, want' followed by a subordinate clause. Yang Dao (1980) has described kom as either the conjunction 'so that, in order that' or the verb 'want' followed by a subordinate clause. These descriptive statements followed by example sentences afford no coherent syntactic analysis. In an attempt to arrive at one, I looked at the example sentences given by these authors as well as data found in the folk tales we used in a seminar on Hmong syntax, and formulated hypotheses which I tested out with my informants. Results from this study, which I will present below, show that kom can function as a higher verb meaning 'tell, order somebody to do something', as a complementizer introducing an embedded sentence and as an idiomatic phrase when it is followed by the 'can/able to' particle tau. I will look at each of these using Standard Theory as a framework for analysis.

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Kom as a Higher Verb

Let us consider one of the examples Mottin gives (130):

(1) Kuv kom nws mus

I order him go

'I ordered him to go/I told him to go'

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Mottin claims that "as in reported speech, the main verb can be understood" and that "when this is the case, the understood verb is always qhia 'tell'. In other words, kom by itself can be translated by 'tell'". There is no solid syntactic evidence in Mottin's statement to disregard the fact that kom could not simply be the main verb in the example he gives. According to my informants, qhia could indeed be inserted before kom. This would yield a different sentence, in which kom functions as a complementizer (see discussion in the next section).

My hypothesis that kom could be a main verb was strengthened by sentences in the data I collected which followed the same pattern as Mottin's example and by a sentence Heimbach gave (85):

(2) Kuv tsis kom nws mus
I NEG make him go
'I won't make him go/I won't cause him to go'

In Heimbach's example, the negative particle tsis occurs before kom; this is one of the helpful devices in determining whether an entity is a verb or not. I double-checked this example with my informants and used the syntactic tests discussed below to check out the hypothesis that kom is a main verb. All these tests help determine if an entity is a verb or not.

Negative insertion. Hmong inserts the particle tsis in front of the verb to negate the statement, as seen in:

(3) Kuv tsis mus
I NEG go
'I don't go'

The insertion of tsis in Mottin's example yields the sentence Heimbach gave:

(4) Kuv tsis kom nws mus

I NEG order him go

According to my three informants, this sentence is grammatically acceptable and means 'I didn't order/tell him to go'.

Question formation. Inserting the particle puas before the verb turns the statement into a question, as illustrated in:

(5) Koj puas mus?

you Q go

'Did you go?'

The insertion of puas works in Mottin's example:

(6) Kuv puas kom nws mus?

I Q tell him go

'Did I tell him to go?'

Past tense formation. Hmong inserts the particle tau before the main verb to make it overtly past, as seen below:

(7) Kuv tau mus

I past go

'I went'

The insertion of tau is acceptable in Mottin's example:

(8) Kuv tau kom nws mus

I past tell him go

'I told him to go'

Future tense formation. The insertion of yuav before the verb puts the action overtly into the future, as illustrated in:

(9) Kuv yuav mus

I fut. go

'I will go'

This, too, works in Mottin's example:

(10) Kuv yuav kom nws mus

I fut. tell him go

'I will tell him to go'

Negative imperative formation. Hmong inserts the negative particle tsis followed by the particle txhob in front of the verb to turn the statement into a negative command. Tsis is optional and txhob is obligatory, as seen in:

(11) (Tsis) txhob mus!

NEG NEG go

'Don't go!'

The test is positive with kom:

(12) (Tsis) txhob kom nws mus!

NEG NEG tell him go

'Don't tell him to go!'

These tests strongly suggest that kom is a verb. However, all the particles used are pre-verbal and don't exclude the possibility of having ghia as a main verb before kom, as Mottin claims. We need further evidence to support the hypothesis.

'Can/able to' modality test. Inserting the particle tau after the verb adds the modality 'can/able to' to it, as seen in:

(13) Kuv mus tau

I go can

'I can go'

When applied to Mottin's example, the result is ungrammatical:

(14) *Kuv kom tau nws mus

I tell can him go

Tag formation. Hmong has a tag duplicating the main verb, as illustrated in the following example from Mottin (38):

(15) Koj mus los tsis mus?

you go or NEG go

'Are you going or not?'

When this tag is attached to (1), kom shows up in the tag:

(16) Kuv kom nws mus los tsis kom?

I tell him go or NEG tell

'Did I tell him to go or not?'

If we assume that qhia is understood, as Mottin does, qhia shows up in the tag:

(17) Kuv qhia kom nws mus los tsis qhia?

I instruct comp he go or NEG instruct

'Did I instruct him to go or not?'

The fact that kom shows up in the tag in (16) is the most persuasive piece of evidence to support the hypothesis that kom can be a main verb.

The occurence of the pre-verbal particles tsis, puas, tau, yuav and (tsis) txhob before kom (4, 6, 8, 10, 12) and, most of all, the duplication of kom in the tag (16) confirm the hypothesis that kom can be a main verb. Mottin was right when he said that "kom by itself can be translated by 'tell' " (130), but not because qhia is the understood main verb. The syntactic tests mentionned above show that kom can function as a higher verb meaning 'tell, order' in its own right. When used as such, it implies a strong

command. This is illustrated further in the following sentence from a folk tale:

(18) Ces Txiv Nraug Ntsuag txawm kom niag Niam Nkauj Kub Kaws
and the Orphan then order Nia Ngao Kou Ker
mus ntov ntoo.
go cut tree
'And then the Orphan ordered Nia Ngao Kou Ker to go and cut down trees.'

(From Nia Ngao Zhua Pa , 1st version by Lou Lee, 18)

Semantic incompatibility between the modal tau 'can/able to' and the verb kom 'tell, order' accounts for the ungrammaticality found in (14).

Kom as a Complementizer

In this section I will look at sentences in which kom is inserted between a higher verb and an embedded sentence and discuss the hypothesis that kom is a complementizer in that case. Mottin makes a distinction between the following two sentences (130):

(19) a. Kuv xav mus
I want go
'I want to go'

b. Kuv xav kom nws mus
I want comp him go
'I want him to go'

In the first sentence the subjects of the higher and the lower verbs are co-referential and an Equi rule controlled by the higher subject deletes the lower subject. According to Mottin, the insertion of kom in (19b) "implies an intention, a sense of will towards a third party" (130). From a syntactic

standpoint, kom seems to function like a complementizer introducing an embedded sentence. When asked where the sentences could be "cut in two", my informants said after xav. They always separated sentences following the same pattern after the main verb. Although constituent breaks cannot be used as syntactic evidence, it is helpful to get native speakers' intuitional feedback on that. Better syntactic evidence to support the hypothesis that kom is a complementizer is provided by applying the negative insertion, question formation and 'can/able to' modality tests defined in the first section of this paper to the following sentence:

(20) Kuv qhia kom nws mus
I instruct comp him go
'I instructed him to go'

Negative insertion:

(21) Kuv tsis qhia (*tsis) kom nws mus
I NEG instruct comp him go
'I didn't instruct him to go'

The negative particle tsis is inserted before the higher verb, it cannot occur before kom.

Question formation:

(22) Kuv puas qhia (*puas) kom nws mus?
I Q instruct comp him go
'Did I instruct him to go?'

The question marker puas is inserted before the higher verb, it cannot occur before kom.

'Can/able to' modality test:

(23) Kuv qhia tau kom nws mus

I instruct can comp him go

'I can instruct him to go'

Tau is inserted between the higher verb and kom, as it should be. It can also follow kom; the resulting pattern, i.e. main verb kom tau, changes the meaning of the sentence and will be discussed in the next section.

The facts that tsis and puas are inserted before the higher verb and that tau is inserted between the higher verb and kom show that kom functions as a complementizer. This justifies Mottin's classification of kom as a subordinate conjunction (130). Mottin lists a few verbs which can be followed by kom (131):

hais	'say, speak'
qhia	'inform, instruct, teach, tell'
txib	'tell somebody to do something'
thov	'ask, beg'
xav	'want'
kheev	'be willing, consent to'
ua	'make, do on purpose'
txhib	'excite, entice'
yuam	'compel'

There were numerous sentences with kom in the data I collected. The verbs preceding kom are listed below:

ntuas	'advise'
ntiab	'drive away, drive out'
nyiam	'like'
xov	'enclose with a fence'
thawb	'push'
cheb	'sweep'
tos	'wait'
pab	'help'
txwv	'forbid'
noj	'eat'
txiav	'decide'
foom	'curse'
ntaus	'strike, hit, beat'
tsoo	'hit, crush'
tua	'fire weapons'

sau	'write'
kawm ntawv	'study'
piav	'explain'
nyeem	'read'
qw	'shout, yell'
tso	'send'
yuam	'force'

This is a great variety of verbs. What do they have in common? They can all be followed by an embedded sentence introduced by kom and conveying a result, an intention, or an implicit command. It is difficult to narrow down the semantics of kom to a single word translation when it is used as a complementizer. Mottin and Yang Dao came closest to doing so when they translated kom by 'so that, in order that'. In all the sentences in which kom functions as a complementizer, the higher subject NP affects the behavior of the lower subject NP via a great variety of verbs. It is my contention that any verb whose semantics allows the subject to affect the behavior of the lower subject can be followed by kom.

Having discussed the semantics of kom as a complementizer, I will now turn to structural patterns. The basic pattern is the following:

NP main verb [kom NP VP]$_{\overline{S}}$

This pattern applies to all the verbs I listed earlier and is illustrated below:

(24) Hais kom nws khiav mus

say comp her depart go

'Tell her to go away'

(From The Orphan and Ngao Zhua Pa, Level 1:20)

(25) Peb tos kom hnub tuaj siab siab tso puas tau?

we wait comp sun rise high high first Q can

'Can we wait until the sun is high up?'

(From The Monkeys and the Grasshoppers, Level 2:9)

(26) Kuv qw kom nws ceevfaj

I shout comp he be careful

'I shout so that he's careful'

(From Tong Vang, informant)

When the higher and lower subjects are co-referential, the lower subject is deleted, as seen below:

(27) Peb kawm ntawv kom txawj ntawv

we study comp be knowledgeable

'We study in order to be knowledgeable'

(Bertrais 1979: 104)

(28) Peb tua kom yeej cobtsib koom tshaj

we fire weapons comp win Vietnamese communist

'We fire weapons in order to defeat the Vietnamese communists.'

(From Tong Vang, informant)

According to my informants, it is possible, but not necessary to keep peb in the lower sentence in (27) and (28). In that case, the translations would be: 'We study so that we are knowledgeable' for (27) and 'We fire weapons so that we defeat the Vietnamese communists' for (28).

The lower subject is also deleted when it has been mentionned previously, as seen in the following excerpt from a folk tale:

(29) Kuv nyiam kom sawv daws nyob ua ke li no mus li.

I like comp everybody live together like this forever

Tab sis kuv nyiam kom (sawv daws) ua suab sab...

but I like comp make noise loud

'I'd like for all of us to live togeter like this forever. But I also like for us to make loud noises...'

(From Shao and His Fire, Level2:8)

In sentences where the main verb is followed by an indirect object NP which is also the subject of the lower sentence, the lower subject is retained (30), pronominalized (31) or deleted (32, 33):

(30) Hais rau nws kom nws mus cheb tsev zoo zoo.
say to her comp she go sweep house well well
'Tell her to go and sweep the house carefully'
(From Yao the Orphan, Level 2:13)

(31) Hais rau koj poj niam kom nws khiav mus
say to your wife comp she depart go
'Tell your wife to go away'
(From The Orphan and Ngao Zhua Pa, Level1:19)

(32) Kuv qw rau nws kom ceevtiaj
I shout at him comp be careful
'I shout at him so that he's careful'
(From Tong Vang, informant)

(33) Nws foom rau yeej kom txhob tau zoo
he curse at man comp NEG have good fortune
'He cursed the man so that he would not have good fortune'
(From Tong Vang, informant)

The lower subject could also be deleted in (30) and (31).

Syntactically, an interesting phenomenon came up while looking at one of the examples Mottin gives in his section on kom (130):

(34) Kuv ntuas Lis kom mus = (35) Kuv ntuas kom Lis mus
I advise Lee comp go I advise comp Lee go
'I advised Lee to go'

According to Mottin, there is no difference between (34) and (35). This was confirmed by my informants. The corresponding question is:

(36) Koj ntuas Lis li cas?
you advise Lee what
'What did you advise Lee to do?'

(36) shows that ntuas takes a higher object NP. It functions like a force-type verb in English, but instead of obligatorily deleting the lower subject NP using Equi-NP deletion, Hmong offers a choice of deletion[9] either the lower subject NP (34) or the higher object NP (33).

Pab 'help' functions in the same way in the following example:

(37) Pab nws kom hlob zuj zus = (38) Pab kom nws hlob zuj zus
help him comp grow little by little help comp he grow
'Help him grow little by little'

I have found other verbs in the data which offer the same choice when they are followed by kom:

ntiab	'drive out, drive away'
qhia	'inform, tell, instruct, teach'
txwv	'forbid'
xov	'enclose with a fence'
thawb	'push'

Further sub-categorization of verbs which can take this structure and determining what accounts for the deletion choice would be interesting topics to pursue.

To conclude this section I will mention an interesting fact concerning negative formation in embedded sentences introduced by kom. In all the sentences I collected in which the lower verb is negated, this verb is preceded by txhob rather than tsis. This is illustrated in the following example from Mottin (86):

(align) (39) Nws pab kom tus tsov txhob tom kuv

he help comp clf tiger NEG bite me

'He helped me so that the tiger woudn't bite me'

Mottin (1978), Heimbach (1979) and Bertrais (1979) have described txhob as a particle used before the verb to express a strong negative command. The negative imperative thus formed can optionally be preceded by the usual negative marker tsis, as seen in:

(40) Tsis txhob txhawj = (41) Txhob txhawj

NEG NEG IMP worry NEG IMP worry

'Don't worry'

(From How We Got Grain and Meat, Level 1:11, 24)

I formulated the hypothesis that tsis could also be optionally inserted before txhob in embedded sentences starting with kom. This was confirmed by my informants, with no difference between the kom (NP) tsis txhob V and kom (NP) txhob V patterns.

I further hypothesized that (tsis) txhob was the obligatory negative marker in lower sentences introduced by kom and that tsis alone could not be used in that case. My informants, however, accepted the kom (NP) tsis V pattern, stating that the sentences were grammatical but that they did not convey as strong a negative as the kom (NP) (tsis) txhob V pattern. Considering the facts that all the sentences I found in the data followed the kom (NP) (tsis) txhob V pattern and that my informants prefered this pattern to the kom (NP) tsis V one, I will suggest that the former is the unmarked pattern and the latter the marked pattern for negative formation in embedded sentences introduced by kom.

The idiomatic phrase kom tau

As seen in (14), the modal tau 'can/able to' cannot follow kom when kom is a main verb, because of the semantic incompatibility between the modality and the strength of the command in kom 'order, tell somebody to do something'. Kom can, however be inserted between a main verb and tau. In that case, the sequence kom tau seems to function like an idiomatic phrase. This point is illustrated below:

(13) Kuv mus tau

I go can

'I can go'

(42) Kuv mus kom tau

I go

'I will make myself go' (no matter what)

When tau follows the main verb (13), it simply expresses the 'can/able to' modality, as seen earlier. When kom is inserted between the verb and tau (42), it changes the modality and implies a command, something to the effect "not only can I do it, but I have to carry out the action, no matter what the circumstances are". Tau goes with kom in that case according to my informants and the sequence functions as a separate semantic unit. Kom tau can follow a variety of verbs, as seen in the following examples from Tong Vang, one of my informants:

(43) Kuv nqa kom tau lub pob zeb ntawd

I lift clf rock that

'I have to be able to lift that rock'

(44) Peb caum kom tau lub tsheb daj tod

we chase clf car yellow that

'We have to be able to catch up with that yellow car'

Conclusion

Using the results of pre-verbal particle and tag-formation tests, I have shown that kom can function as a higher verb meaning 'tell, order somebody to do something'. I have also defined kom as a complementizer and discussed structural patterns. Finally, I have shown that, when preceded by a main verb, kom tau functions as an idiomatic phrase meaning 'can and will + V, no matter what'.

(This paper is part of an M.A. thesis on complementation in Hmong).

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